



PRESS RELEASE

House Armed Services Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

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OPENING STATEMENT

CHAIRMAN FLOYD D. SPENCE

GENERAL DEBATE ON HR 1401,

FY2000 NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. Speaker, on May 19th the Armed Services Committee reported H.R. 1401 on a bipartisan vote of 55 to 1. Despite the strong vote on what I believe is a very good bill, our military is confronting its most serious problems since the "hollow military" days of the late 1970s.

The Committee's approach to this and previous bills has been shaped by long-standing concerns over the risks America's armed forces face today. Although public perception is that the post-Cold-War world is stable, three basic trends ought to give every American cause for concern:

First, the level of resources that the United States devotes to national defense remains at a historical low. Not since before World War II has defense spending represented such a small proportion of the nation's gross domestic product as it does today. Despite being the world's wealthiest nation, a nation with important interests all over the world, and the world's only remaining superpower, we devote only three cents out of every dollar of the nation's GDP to national defense.

Second, U.S. armed forces are being tasked at a record pace with an ever-expanding list of peacekeeping, peace-making, and other contingency missions. From Panama to the Persian Gulf to Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, the Balkans, Korea and the Taiwan Straits, our troops are overextended and operating at levels that simply can not be sustained over time.

Third, the world is an increasingly dangerous place – especially in regard to the proliferation of ballistic missiles, weapons of mass destruction, and other high-technology capabilities to our potential adversaries. Many of our theater commanders have told us, quite frankly, that if we had to fight a large scale war, today, we should expect higher casualties among our forces, our allies' forces, and civilians.

As a result it has become increasingly difficult for the U.S. military to protect and promote our national security interests around the world. That is why, over the past nine months, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have concluded that the ability of U.S. armed forces to execute the National Military Strategy involves "moderate to high risk." And this disturbing risk assessment was made before operations in the Balkans

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began several months ago. Operation “Allied Force” now qualifies as a third major theater war, entirely separate from any threat of conflict in the Persian Gulf or in Korea. And as we continue to read in media reports, the air war in the Balkans might easily change to an invasion or a peacekeeping operation on the ground.

The Committee has repeatedly expressed its concerns about declining defense budgets, increasing missions, and rising threats for years. With the Joint Chiefs speaking more openly over the past year about these significant risks, problems, and shortfalls, the Administration seemed to be “turning the corner” on the issue of America’s national defense needs. In his State of the Union speech earlier this year, President Clinton spoke of the need for “a sustained increase over the next six years for readiness, for modernization, and for pay and benefits for our troops and their families.” In fact, the President’s three themes – quality of life, readiness, and modernization – have been the focus of the Armed Services Committee’s efforts for years.

Unfortunately, the reality of the President’s defense budget request has fallen short of the rhetoric. The President’s defense budget request was riddled with overly optimistic economic assumptions and budget gimmicks, all of it directly linked, even held hostage, to the President’s domestic political agenda on Social Security. But even with all of the political linkages, gamesmanship and gimmicks, the President’s Fiscal Year 2000 defense budget request provided only about one-half of the funding necessary to meet the unfunded requirements identified by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and only about one-half of the unfunded requirements identified over the six-year defense plan.

It is in this context that the Committee has added, consistent with the Budget Resolution, more than \$8 billion dollars to the President’s request, and has targeted crucial additional funding for a variety of badly needed quality of life, readiness, and equipment modernization needs. But despite the Committee’s best efforts, we are only managing the growing risks to our national security, not eliminating them. In my view, a “high-risk” strategy is an unacceptable strategy, and certainly unworthy of the United States of America. Absent a long-term, sustained commitment to revitalizing America’s armed forces, we will continue to run the inevitable risks that come from asking our troops to do more with less. As Secretary of Defense Cohen recently said, “We have a situation where we have a smaller force and we have more missions, and so...we are wearing out systems, wearing out people.”

Mr. Speaker, in this increasingly dangerous world, there is no such thing as “acceptable risk.” Unless the nation fields the forces and provides the resources necessary to execute the National Military Strategy, the inevitable alternative is for the United States to retreat from its global responsibilities and interests. This ought to be unacceptable to all Members and all Americans.

Mr. Speaker, I will leave a discussion of the many specific initiatives in the bill to my colleagues on the Armed Services Committee who have worked very hard since February to get us to this point here today. However, I would like to recognize the hard work of the subcommittee and panel Chairmen and Ranking Members. Their leadership and bipartisan approach to issues has permitted the Committee to significantly improve upon the Administration’s request in this bill.

In closing, Mr. Speaker, I would also like to thank the staff. Without their expertise and tireless efforts, we would not be here today.

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